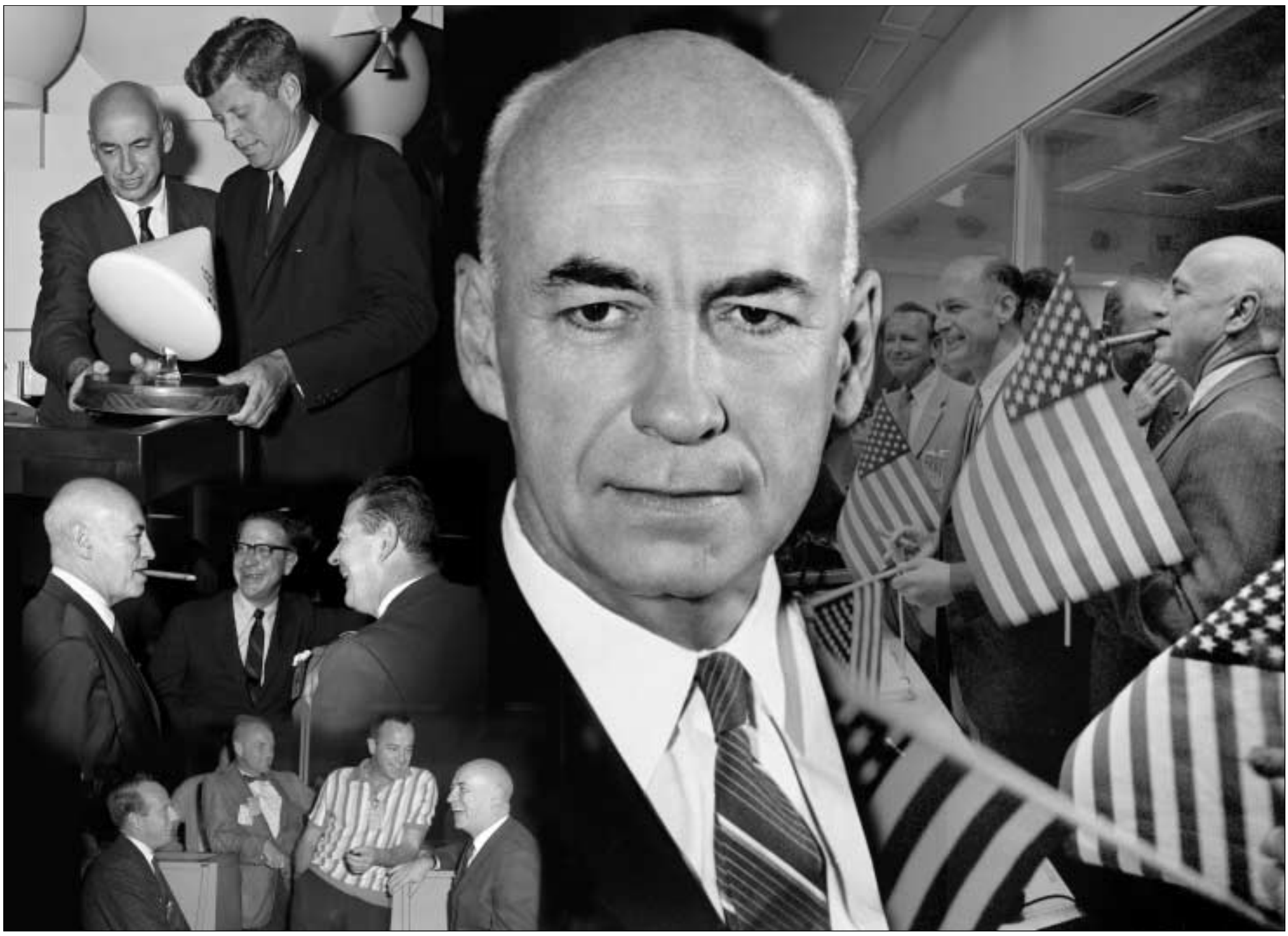
JSC Remembers Gilruth, Father of America's Human Space Flight Program

October 8, 1913 – August 17, 2000



Gilruth led the Johnson Space Center through 25 manned space flights including Alan Shepherd's first Mercury flight in May 1961, the first lunar landing by Apollo 11 in July 1969, the dramatic rescue of Apollo 13 in 1970, and the Apollo 15 mission in July 1971.

Dr. Robert Rowe Gilruth, one of the earliest leaders of our nation's space program and the first director of what is now the Johnson Space Center, died August 17. He was 86.

Credited as the "father of human space flight" by JSC Director George Abbey, Gilruth was honored at a memorial service at JSC August 28.

Teague Auditorium filled with legends of the space program as well as friends, family and admirers who came to share stories, memories and pay tribute to the man who championed the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs and led our country to ultimate victory in the space race.

> ***His courage to explore the unknown, his insistence on following strict scientific procedures, and his technical expertise directly contributed to the ultimate success of the Apollo program and the landing of a man on the moon.***
>
> –Daniel S. Goldin
> NASA Administrator

"He had the fortitude to take the risks required to accomplish the tasks," said former JSC Director Dr. Chris Kraft in a speech at the memorial service. "From the beginning days of flying Atlas rockets to the recovery from a tragic fire to landing men on the moon and returning them safely to Earth - his courageous leadership was tested and proven."

"His zeal for winged space vehicles led to the design and development of the space shuttle," added Kraft. "His vision of a space station is being realized by building of ISS. There is no airplane design in the United States or space program at NASA that did not benefit from his research."

Accordingly, Gilruth was cited for his expertise in solving problems and his commitment to crew safety. Astronaut John Young, whose life ultimately lay in Gilruth's hands during the early space programs, shared stories from Gemini through the shuttle program.

When engineers were stumped by the challenges associated with the tiles on the shuttle, Gilruth played a role in determining a tile densification solution. "That's just the kind of fellow he was," said Young. "He was very quiet and would always do things people never knew about, but he did them and helped us all do the things in human space exploration… His work is still going on and we can be mighty thankful for that."

Other speakers included Gilruth's wife Jo Gilruth, his daughter Barbara Jean Wyatt, Dr. Maxime A. Faget, Dr. Charles Berry and Abbey, many of whom attributed the present success of NASA to those early successes during Gilruth's tenure.

"Gilruth enabled this nation's human space flight program," said Abbey. "Enabled it to get humans into orbit, and did much more to get men to the moon and successfully back to Earth. He's left a great legacy – this center, a center he built."

"We have the International Space Station and the space shuttle programs today because of the vision and dedicated effort of Bob Gilruth," added Abbey.

A tree in honor of Gilruth was planted in the Memorial Grove on the JSC grounds following the Teague service. A T-38 flyover and a bagpipe solo completed the ceremony.

Profile of a Pioneer

Gilruth, a celebrated aerospace scientist and engineer, was instrumental in shaping the American space program during a time when the glory and success of manned space flight was yet to be realized.

Born in Minnesota in 1913, Gilruth would be a key member of the generation that fostered the vastest amount of technological changes and advancement for our country.

Piqued by an early interest in engineering, Gilruth attended the University of Minnesota, earning a bachelor of science degree in aeronautical engineering in 1935 and a master of science in aeronautical engineering in 1936.

Armed with his mind, Gilruth began his professional career at Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory where he conducted flight research, his principal work being in the field of stability, control and handling qualities of airplanes.

At age 31, Gilruth was selected to manage the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics' (NACA, forerunner of NASA), newly established free-flight guided missile range at Wallops Island, Virginia. He led the team which later became the Pilotless Aircraft Research Division (PARD) and led to the creation of NACA's Wallops Island Launching Range. Here, Gilruth compiled basic information on the aerodynamic and structural behavior of wings, controls and other key items in missile and aircraft design. His work established aerodynamic principles that have become the cornerstone of aircraft and spacecraft design.

"He was a major contributor to the advancement of the state of the art of flight," said Kraft, "He defined the first set of flying qualities for airplanes, a compendium of the characteristics of a good flying machine and the maneuvers

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